JESUS CHRIST FOR MODERN MAN
Savior
March 16, 1975

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John 19:17-22; I Corinthians 1:18-24

Whatever else must be said about the crucifixion of Jesus Christ the Gospel writers themselves regarded it as the central, essential event in the story. More than one half ~~Fully two thirds~~ of the material in the four Gospels either deals with it directly or the events of the five days immediately prior to it. The rest of the Gospel record is there, it seems, leading to - pointing toward this terrible but all - important event. St. Paul spoke not only for himself but for the Gospel writers and the early Christian Church when he wrote, "We preach Christ crucified."

We have been thinking in recent weeks about our story, the story that we have discovered makes all the difference in the world to us. We have looked at Jesus the man. We have examined Jesus the teacher. This morning we come, literally to the crux: the claim of Christian Faith that Jesus was and is the Savior, and the event in which we experience the authenticity of that claim - his death on the cross.

For approximately three years he and his small entourage of followers traveled throughout Galilee. Wherever he went people came to hear and see him. He told them that the Kingdom of God was in their midst and that they were citizens of that Kingdom as they lived the will of God in their lives. He taught them about God's will, he healed their sickness, he ate with them in their homes, and spoke in their Synagogues and then he made a decision that would cost him his life. He decided to go with his disciples to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. There, in five short days the opposition

to him crystallized. After a monumental amount of scheming and conspiring a way was devised to dispose of him quickly. The best the religious officials could come up with was a charge of blasphemy - but the Romans weren't about to execute a man for a religious offence, particularly in light of the persistant problems they had with their Jewish subjects. The best the Romans could come up with was the charge of disturbing the peace - hardly a capital offense.

What seems to have happened is that the religious officials were able to persuade the political powers that he was guilty of treason, a revolutionary. But the Romans still must have been a little queasy about the arrangement for Pilate, in what looks like a desperation measure had Jesus beaten and shown publically, as if to say "Isn't this enough?" But the religious officials had anticipated that, and had the crowd whipped into a blood-thirsty mob. When Pilate brought him out-bleeding from the particularly ingenious method of whipping - (leather straps with sharpened pieces of lead attached) - the crowd played its role to the hilt and demanded his crucifixion.

So the deal was made. Pilate publically washed his hands of the whole affair and ordered a cordon of soldiers to do the job, which thay had to do that day anyway; and so they merely had to squeeze him in between two theives. Thus he died, a slow and painful and humiliatingly public death. The one who had healed the sick and taught that loving forgiveness was God's will for his people, had nails driven through his hands and feet, and sharp thorns pressed into the flesh of his forehead, and a spear pushed into his side. As he hung there, slowly dying from asphyxiation and shock and loss of blood, he could

hear the insults hurled at him by that special crowd that always attended an execution, and he could feel the spit of other men running down his face.

He died unjustly, unfairly, unusually brutally. He died, in a sense, because he challenged the status quo. He died because he had lived for a better way than hatred, vengeance, selfishness. He died because he had made the wrong kind of friends. He died for his cause.

No one can fail to be moved by that. In all of history he is perhaps the most noble martyr. And yet to be inspired - to be touched emotionally by his brave dying is not what Christian Faith is about. For this death was more than a martyrdom - this man more than a martyr. Christian Faith sees in the crucifixion of Jesus divine intent. The story of his death becomes the story of something God did in man's history. When the early Christians looked back at it and remembered it and wrote about it, it was not a defeat that was subsequently set right by the resurrection. The crucifixion, itself, they claimed, is the saving act of God.

That's the stumbling block - the folly about which St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians: the persistent claim of Christians down through the centuries - that to be moved by the martyrdom of Jesus of Nazareth is not the point: that the crucifixion is not so much the story of what men did to Jesus as it is the story of what God did for men.

As St. Paul recognized, the Gospel of Jesus Christ is most vulnerable at precisely this point. And it is easy to react emotionally to the injustice of his death and the beauty of his example, missing altogether the essential claim that you and I are saved by what happened on the cross.

What does that mean? Saved from what? All religion is based on the assumption that there is something wrong with the human condition. When someone asked G. K. Chersterton why he had become a Roman Catholic he said simply, "to get rid of my sins." That is a deceptively simple statement. In his excellent little volume Christian Doctrine, the British theologian J. S. Whale wrote, "That man needs to be reconciled to something; that there is a tragic disharmony in the human situation that cries out to heaven itself for adjustment - this is the conviction to which the literature of the world bears witness. Oedipus and King Lear are haunted by the same shadow. If you could take this away from Dante or Goethe, there would be little left but meaningless fragments." (Christian Doctrine p 74)

- underline like

Contemporary literature keeps hammering at the same theme. The suggested resolutions are different, but poetic sensitivity always, it seems, concludes that we are out of step, out of key - something is wrong with us. John Updike, Samuel Beckett, conclude that alone, humankind is a rather depressing lot, and there is something tragically, frustratingly incomplete about life as it is.

There are many words for it. The church has used "sin" for so long that it has very little meaning. "Sin" in our time seems to indicate nothing more than minor infractions of middle class morality. And that isn't it at all. Thus we are inundated by synonyms: "sickness unto death, alienation, estrangement, anxiety, guilt, Many feel that whatever it is it is most commonly expressed in the guilt that we carry around with us.

The cross of Jesus Christ is Christianity's answer to sin or whatever word you choose to describe the human predicament. Or better said, the

cross is God's Answer. And at this point we must of necessity use the vocabulary of theology. The doctrine is called "atonement," which means literally "the covering over': that is, the covering over of man's sin.

Now occassionally the doctrine of atonement sounds a little bit like bribery. Man, a sinner has offended God. God, in absolute righteousness, is angry with sin - or sinners - and demands that justice be done: that punishment be meted out. Jesus stands in for us, takes our place, is punished instead of us, God is satisified and men are saved. That, unfortunately, is the way a lot of people understand what happened on the cross. But that is not what atonement means. God is not a rigid, cruel potentate who demands a pound of flesh when his laws are broken.

Rather, atonement begins with the love of God. In his classic work on the incarnation, D. M. Baillie wrote, "The crucifixion of Jesus set men thinking more than anything else that has ever happened in the life of the human race. And the most remarkable fact in the whole history of religious thought is this: that when the early Christians looked back and pondered on the dreadful thing that had happened, it made them think of the redeeming love of God.

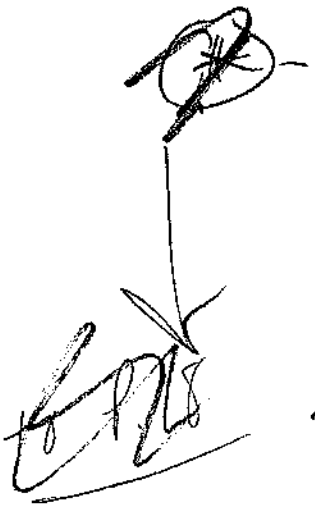
Not simply of the love of Jesus, but of the Love of God." (God Was In Christ p 184)

God wants to put the human situation right. He wants people to be reconciled with him. He does not want us to be estranged or alienated or guilty. And so because he loves he accepts and forgives: but because he loves his forgiveness is very, very costly.

I think we can understand that. ~~I think we know a little bit about that.~~ Assume for a moment that someone you love very much has done some-

thing wrong, something which in a particular way made a cheap travesty of your love. If your love is deep and authentic there is no question of passing it off as if nothing happened: easy indulgence is not the product of love. Just because you love so much forgiveness will be very costly. Just because you love so much you will, in a very real sense, bear ~~the burden~~ the guilt and shame of the other person in your own heart. Even if the person who has wronged you is motivated by your love to apologize, to ask for a restoration of your relationship, it will not be easy. It will hurt deeply: you will have to sacrifice something and experience real pain.

The analogy breaks down after while. But it points to the experience Christian Faith calls atonement. God loves us so much that he took the initiative - in becoming a man, suffering and dying so that we might be restored. It was for him a very costly affair.



I began this series of sermons by talking about relevance. I suggested that in our effort to make our faith relevant we may have become irrelevant: and that the Gospel itself is perhaps much more relevant than we ever expected. Let's try that out for a minute. In the past men have ~~regarded~~ seen the saving action of God in Christ ~~to have relevance~~ in regard to sin or to hell. But, suppose for the moment that neither of these words means much. And without particularly agreeing that the concepts of sin and hell are obsolete, assume further that if we are to talk intelligently about our faith we must find other words. If not sin and hell, from what do modern men need saving? May I suggest that the human condition might best be described today with the word cynicism.

We have heard much in recent years about the various crises of confidence that threaten to engulf us. People don't seem to believe in the government or the courts or the schools or the economic system

or the Churches. Somewhere along the line - and it seems to have begun in the early sixties - American people began to be cynical. Perhaps it was after two Kennedy's and Martin Luther King were assinated, and the new Frontier forgotten, and Vietnam became the longest war and most nightmarish experience in our history. Perhaps it was after the deception in South East Asia and My Lai and the Pentagon Papers. Or perhaps it happened only after Watergate and recession and inflation. In any case, I believe we have a monumental problem on our hands because a lot of ~~directo~~ people - not just the revolutionaries - are in despair about the integrity and viability of our institutions.

Norman Cousins wrote recently, "The most serious problem confronting the nation is not inflation or the energy shortage or dwindling resources or the danger of War in the Middle East. The most serious problem right now is that the American people are psychologically depleted." (Saturday Review / World 12/14/74) Cousins went on to suggest that the result of our psychological depletion is "sudden lack of ~~confidence~~ hope, for the future".

The psychiatrists punctuate the point by observing that feelings of personal inadequacy are rampant. We keep feeling smaller and smaller: more helpless and powerless. And this in turn has cut the bottom out of our confidence in the future.

Well, it is my opinion that we need ~~saving~~ to be saved from that. And I don't think it is pushing the crucifixion too far to look there. That's not asking too much of the cross. Because Jesus wasn't crucified in a church: he was executed publically, in the world, on a garbage heap because of a cheap political conspiracy. He died, regardless of the theological understanding we attach to it, in the same kind of ambiguous situation we find ourselves in today - and it is here that he offers to save us.

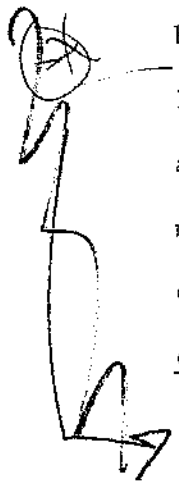
(*) Just when men were acting out their worst instincts - just when men were doing something so wrong that it embarrasses us, Jesus was showing them that they were worth the life of God's son.

I am saved from cynicism about myself and my fellow man by the fact that Jesus died on the cross.(*) Jesus believed that men were worth dying for.

I am saved from cynicism about the future by the fact that Jesus died on the cross: my future, the future of the Church, the nation, and the world. For what happened on Calvary was that God was so involved in what appeared to be an uncategorically obscene event that it came out meaning love and goodness and salvation. That means that whatever crises life hands to us, whatever kinds of personal crucifixions we must endure, God will be in them too with love and redemption and creativity. That means that God will be in the valley of the shadow of death and that I can expect him to help me pick up the broken pieces of life. The crucifixion of Jesus Christ means that nothing in life will separate me from the love of God. And in that, I would suggest, is the rebirth of confidence.

And yet, finally, when everything is said about the cross that we know how to say: when we have exhausted all the various ideas of atonement: when we have thought with as much theological expertise as we can muster - great or little, there remains something inexpressably personal about what happened on Calvary.

J. S. Whale said it well: "Plain men are not necessarily interested in theology. They know that religion is never the preserve of specialists, but the gift of God to wayfaring men." (op. cit. p 96) And J. B. Phillips laid aside the tools of theology and confessed "I cannot pretend, even now, after many years in the ministry of the Church, that I understand the mystery of the atonement...I only know that what you and I could never do was done for us, at infinite cost, upon the cross." (Good News: Thoughts on God and Man p 188)



The story is told of an Archbishop of Paris who was standing in the

pulpit of Notre Dame Cathedral. "Thirty years ago," he said, "three young men came into this cathedral, rough, rude and cynical. Two of them bet the other he couldn't go into a confessional and make a phony confession. He tried to fool the old priest, but the priest sensed the arrogance, the lie and said: "Very well, my son. Every confession requires a penance, and this will be yours. Go into the Chapel, stand before the Crucifix, look into the face of the crucified Christ, and say -'all this you did for me, and I don't care a damn.'"

The young man swaggered out of the Confessional but his companions would not pay the bet until he had done the required penance. So he went to the Chapel and looked at the crucified Christ and said, 'all this you did for me, and I...' He never finished the sentence. And the Archbishop telling the story leaned over the pulpit and said, "I was that young man." (Wallace Hamilton, The Anatomy of Courage, The Protestant Hour, 1968, p 67)

What happened to Jesus Christ was for us. However you wish to adorn it or describe it, it was for ~~our sins~~ us that he died: that you and I might be forgiven and know our forgiveness: that you and I might be reconciled with our God and at peace with ourselves.

It was the considered opinion of John Calvin that the great theological affirmations of the Church ought to be sung rather than recited. The crucifixion of Jesus Christ and what it means is not a matter of the mind alone. It is more a matter of the heart.

~~So let us sing - words Christian people have been singing for more than 800 years.~~

~~What language shall I borrow~~

~~To thank Thee dearest Friend,~~

What language shall I borrow

To thank Thee dearest Friend,

For this Thy dying sorrow

Thy pity without end?

O make me thine forever;

And should I fainting be,

Lord let me never, never

Outlive my love for Thee."

Amen.

[O, Sacred Head, Now Wounded]

So let us sing - about the folly of the cross; about the one who died for us - words which the Church has been singing for more than 800 years.

~~WL~~ 2:30 ~~One of the favorite old Hymns~~ ~~#51 195~~

~~In the cross of Christ I Glory~~

~~Towering o'er the Wrecks of Time~~